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Opening Statement
Chairman Harley Rouda
Hearing on “FEMA’s Natural Disaster Preparedness and Response Efforts During the
Coronavirus Pandemic”
Subcommittee on Environment
July 24, 2020

Good morning. I am convening today's subcommittee hearing to examine preparations of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for responding to and helping our nation recover from natural disasters, which this year will overlap with our nation's ongoing efforts to combat the coronavirus pandemic.

FEMA is the lead federal agency responsible for coordinating preparation, prevention, mitigation, response, and recovery efforts for all domestic disasters – including the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. In recent years, FEMA has struggled to anticipate the severity of multiple disasters, due in part to climate change, secure advanced contracts for supplies, and retain and deploy key personnel. As the United States continues to respond to the coronavirus pandemic and a recent surge in cases across the country, it's clear that this unprecedented moment has left all of us, including FEMA, in uncharted territory.

People have often called the year 2020 apocalyptic. Although some may say that is an exaggeration or said in jest, it certainly at times does not feel like it is far off from the truth.

More than 140,000 Americans have lost their lives due to the current administration's lack of leadership, distrust of science, and continued hesitation to meet the seriousness of the challenges associated with the coronavirus pandemic. And because of this complete lack of leadership and inept response by the Administration, tens of thousands more will die.

As if this horrifying loss of life wasn't tragic enough – we know that climate change is increasing the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events – setting that stage to lose even MORE American lives as a result of natural disasters in coming months.

Therefore, it is *absolutely imperative* that Congress and the American public understand the steps that FEMA is taking to prepare for and respond to natural disasters including hurricanes, wildfires, flooding, and extreme heat – on top of nationwide efforts to slow and stop the spread of the coronavirus.

The 2020 hurricane season began on June 1st, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration forecasters expect 13 to 19 named storms – including six to 10 hurricanes and

three to six major hurricanes. Residents in states known to be hit hardest by hurricanes, like Florida and North Carolina, are facing some of the highest rates of confirmed cases of COVID-19. And, this year's predicted higher than average hurricane season increases the chances of large evacuations of people to northern states like, New York and New Jersey, areas previously hit hard by the virus, which could cause an increase in spread.

For those who are low-wealth and forced to stay and seek emergency shelter since they do not have the means to evacuate, overcrowded shelters, from school gyms to convention centers, risk becoming infection hot spots. The current, serious lags in COVID-19 testing, if not fixed, could very well lead to asymptomatic people who have coronavirus staying in these shelters. And, many of the same people who have less access to health care, less health insurance, and are more likely to have unknown or uncontrolled comorbidities, may be at higher risk of death or complications from COVID-19. These are prime example of how climate change acts as a threat multiplier during public health crises.

Over the last five years, the U.S. has seen more federally declared disasters for wildfires than in many years prior. In 2017 and 2018, California experienced the deadliest and most destructive wildfires in its history – and this year's weather patterns are lining up to result in above-average fire activity.

Wildfire-related risks are particularly high in places like my home state of California – and, in recent weeks, these areas have also seen staggering COVID-19 case numbers continue to rise. This is of significant concern because both smoke and COVID-19 negatively impact our respiratory and cardiovascular systems. In fact, we know that wildfires exacerbate respiratory and lung conditions, especially for children, older adults, and those with underlying conditions such as asthma, chronic heart disease, and diabetes – many of the comorbidities known to increase negative health outcomes and mortality rates among those infected with the coronavirus.

And, while cloth masks can help prevent the spread of coronavirus, these kinds of face coverings do not offer protection from smoke – only properly fitting N95 respirator masks filter out dangerous particles – and, as we've seen, those remain in short supply in many places, including wildfire-prone regions.

And then there is the extreme heat. No other year in recorded history has been as hot as the years between 2014 and 2019, and 2020 has a high likelihood of being the hottest year on record – and this is likely to pose additional challenges to COVID-19 mitigation efforts. When it gets incredibly hot, low-wealth households who do not have access to air conditioning, or who cannot afford to turn it on, may flock to cool and crowded indoor areas, which could result in an increase in coronavirus cases.

As we sit here today, every state in the United States is currently facing a budget shortfall – as a result, many states, territories, and local governments may be more dependent on FEMA for supplies and personnel than in recent years.

In the middle of a respiratory pandemic, we need to know what steps are being taken to safeguard the lives of both FEMA personnel and disaster survivors. We need answers as to whether or not critical medical supplies will be accessible for communities in

need. We need to understand how plans are being adapted to account for simultaneous disasters. We need to be ready, able, and willing to address increasingly likely worst-case scenarios. And we need to help FEMA so they can be fully prepared to meet their mission.

As the saying goes, "by failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail." In this moment, our challenges are unprecedented and extraordinary – and our plans and actions must rise to meet the serious and grave reality we face now and in the coming months and years. Let me put it bluntly – the topics we are discussing today are literally matters of life and death.

I appreciate FEMA Administrator Gaynor's participation in this hearing, and I hope that today's discussion will help inform and support the critically important work FEMA is tasked with – because the stakes *could not* be higher.

Thank you, and I invite Acting Ranking Member of the Subcommittee, Mr. Comer, to give a five-minute opening statement.

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